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Intrigue and Countercharges Mark Case of Purported Spies

By SELWYN RAAB

It was, the Federal Bureau of Investigation says, a cat-and-mouse game designed to trap a Soviet-bloc spy, identified by authorities as Karl Frantisek Koecher.

The game lasted for 12 days in November. Sometimes it consisted of

lie-detector tests and long separate interrogations of Mr. Koecher — a former Central Intelligence Agency employee — and his wife, Hana, in suites used by F.B.I. counterintelligence agents at the Barbizon Plaza Hotel on Central Park South.

At other times, for undisclosed reasons, the agents played the game differently. Believing the Koechers were planning a permanent move from their East Side apartment to Austria, agents helped them with their last-minute arrangements.

As a final gesture, the F.B.I. volunteered to drive the Koechers to Kennedy International Airport for their flight to Austria.

A Surprise Arrest

On the evening of Nov. 27, the Koechers, with packed suitcases, showed up at the Barbizon Plaza for a lift to the airport. It was then that the couple was arrested.

While much about the case remains undisclosed, an account of the Government's pursuit of the Koechers and their lives in the United States has begun to emerge from court statements, affidavits and interviews with friends and co-workers of the couple.

Mr. Koecher said through his attorney, Michael Kennedy, that he had cooperated with the F.B.I. because he believed he might be used as a C.I.A. "operative" in Europe. Rudolph W. Giuliani, the United States Attorney in Manhattan, declined to explain the F.B.I.'s tactics.

According to Federal prosecutors, however, the F.B.I.'s main motive during those 12 days was to extract as much information as possible from the

couple about damage their purported espionage might have caused to national security. The Koechers came to the United States 19 years ago, saying they were Czechoslovak defectors.

Last month, Mr. Koecher pleaded not guilty to an indictment on espionage charges by a Federal grand jury in Manhattan. If convicted, he faces a sentence of up to life in prison.

Mrs. Koecher was arrested as a material witness, and she and her husband are both being held in prison without bail.

Mr. Koecher, through Mr. Kennedy, asserted that he was a double-agent for the C.I.A. Mr. Kennedy, in court statements and interviews, said Mr. Koecher was duped by the F.B.I. into signing a false confession in November that he was a Czechoslovak spy who was assigned to infiltrate the C.I.A.

The confession, according to Mr. Kennedy, was part of a cover story shaped by the F.B.I. and the C.I.A. to enable Mr. Koecher to resume espionage work in Europe for the United States, not for Czechoslovakia.

Documents Passed in 1975

In an interview, Mr. Kennedy acknowledged that Mr. Koecher gave C.I.A. documents to Czechoslovak agents in 1975. But he said it was done at the behest of the C.I.A. and was false information to mislead the Czechoslovaks.

Federal prosecutors have denied that Mr. Koecher was a double-agent for the C.I.A.

Bruce A. Green, an assistant United States Attorney in Manhattan who is in charge of the prosecution, said that during the 12 days in November, both Koechers admitted being trained as spies in Czechoslovakia in the early 1960's. Mr. Green said Mr. Koecher also confessed to using false passports to return secretly to Czechoslovakia on two occasions.

Court testimony, affidavits and interviews have disclosed the following points about the case:

¶The F.B.I. said it uncovered the Koechers' espionage activities "several years ago," but it apparently made no attempt to put the couple under surveillance until Nov. 15.

¶The F.B.I. said it confronted the Koechers on Nov. 15 only after learning they were about to leave the country. Friends and co-workers of the Koechers, however, said they traveled abroad frequently and their plans to sell their cooperative apartment and move to Austria in November had been openly discussed for almost one year.

¶Although Mr. Green and the F.B.I. have said that Mrs. Koecher helped deliver C.I.A. secrets to a Czechoslovak agent in 1975 and that she was a paid courier for the Czechoslovak intelligence service until 1983, no criminal charges have been brought against her. Even without criminal charges, she can be held as a material witness under Federal law. Mr. Kennedy said Mrs. Koecher's constitutional rights were

violated and inadmissible as evidence against her.

¶Mr. Kennedy said that during questioning by the F.B.I., both Koechers passed lie-detector tests proving their loyalty to the United States.

¶An F.B.I. agent testified at a bail hearing that Mr. Koecher reported to the bureau in 1970 and again in 1973, after he went to work for the C.I.A., that Czechoslovak agents had tried to recruit him. This testimony, Mr. Kennedy said, supports Mr. Koecher's contention that he was assisting American intelligence services.

¶Friends said that in the United States both Koechers had frequently expressed militant anti-Communist views and supported conservative causes. The Koechers had indicated to friends that they were leaving the United States primarily because he had been unable to find a permanent job in the last seven years.

Mr. Koecher, who is 50 years old, and his wife, 40, were born in Czechoslovakia.

Mr. Koecher, a lanky, gray-haired man, grew up in Prague and in 1958 received a degree in physics from Charles University in Prague, one of the country's major universities.

Later, he taught mathematics, edited technical books for a state-run publishing company and wrote radio plays and film reviews.

Came to U.S. in 1965

The Koechers immigrated to the United States in December 1965. They said they were political defectors from Czechoslovakia and both became naturalized citizens. But, friends and co-workers said, they disclosed few details of their departure from Czechoslovakia.

Michael Reinitz of Manhattan, an executive for a Long Island printing company who met the couple soon after they arrived in the United States, said that Mr. Koecher at the time talked about having worked clandestinely in Czechoslovakia for Radio Free Europe. Until the early 1970's, the C.I.A. secretly financed Radio Free Europe's broadcasts to Eastern Europe.

"He talked about making reports to Radio Free Europe from a farm outside of Prague," Mr. Reinitz recalled, "and that he had to get out of Czechoslovakia because of political problems."

Mr. Koecher's first job in the United States was as a freelance writer for Radio Free Europe in New York, and over three years he wrote occasional scripts for broadcasts to Czechoslovakia.

Studied Under Brzezinski

In 1969, Mr. Koecher completed a two-year course at Columbia University's Russian Institute, where he studied under Zbigniew Brzezinski.

Mr. Koecher, in applying for a teaching post in 1979, cited Mr. Brzezinski, who was then national security adviser to President Jimmy Carter, as a refer-

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